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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
TELEGRAM

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FROM
AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES

CLASSIFICATION

E.O. 11652:
TAGS:
SUBJECT:

ACTION:

INFO:

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Church and State: Catholic Church Relationship with GOA One Year
After-Coup

SECSTATE WASHDC

AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

☒ Release ☐ Excise ☐ Deny

Exemption(s):

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BUENOS AIRES 2766

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1. SUMMARY. As first year of military government is marked, almost coincident with Holy Week, Argentine Church is troubled by human rights problem but unwilling to confront GOA over abuses. It reflects faithfully the general lack of sympathy in Argentine society with efforts of terrorists and subversives of the extreme left, its reluctant tolerance of repression, and its inability to see any better alternative to present GOA in short run. END SUMMARY.

2. First anniversary of military government, and Holy Week, provided opportunity for Catholic Church to speak out on state of society in Argentina. Given evidence that pressures were growing within the Church to confront GOA more forcefully on human rights

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121

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UNCLASSIFIED

CLASSIFICATION

OPTIONAL FORM 152(H)
(Formerly FS-413(H))
January 1975
Dept. of State

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issue (reftel C), Easter sermons and pastoral letters might have been expected to emphasize Church concern more pointedly than in the past year. That they did not do so is confirmatory evidence that Argentine Church is no more prepared than other major elements of society to place itself in opposition to GOA.

3. Cardinal Aramburu, the Primate, in his homily in the Cathedral on Easter Sunday stayed very much on the high ground of religious exhortation. He referred only briefly and obliquely to the human rights problem: "...in Argentina there is profound desire for peace, and the prompt end of the fratricidal struggle provoked by the guerrilla, and for a return to the corresponding tranquility to so many homes deeply afflicted with uncertainty for the lives, guilty or innocent, of their members." Bishop Garcia of Mar del Plata lashed out at the privileged who aggravate the economic difficulties of the poor.

4. On the other hand, Chief Army ^{Chaplain} ~~Chaplain~~ Menestrina eulogized his soldiers, their wives and children for their courage and sacrifice in ^{protecting} the society, while Bishop Sansierra of San Juan de Cuyo attacked Communists who persecute Christians and "protests over human rights whose intentions are not always clear, and which originate where they are not observed with all their individual, national and international consequences." Bishop Mayer of Bahia Blanca lamented the "inhuman guerrilla," the kidnappings, the anxiety of military and police who live with the fear of assassination, and price increases. He attacked the advance

Classification

UNCLASSIFIED

OPTIONAL FORM 153A
(Formerly FS-413A)
January 1975
Dept. of State

of Marxism in Asia and Africa as well as in the traditionally Christian countries of Europe and America, and the "conspiracy of silence" over sufferings in Vietnam, Laos, and other countries of Asia and Africa.

5. The sermons and letters confirm what is known to be the situation within the Church. A few of the Bishops and priests are wholehearted supporters of the government, and some are known to give comfort and absolution to members of the security forces who bring their conflicts of conscience over abuses to the confessional. A few others have committed themselves to the far left, including two priests who were captured guns in hand leading an attack on a police station. The great majority remain above the struggle, perhaps with sympathies for one side or the other, but without commitment. As a whole, the hierarchy is concerned over governmental human rights abuses and has been willing to support private pressures by the leadership upon the GOA, but not public confrontation. The turning point, if there is one, could come in May with the next general meeting of the Bishops Conference. We have been told by Church sources that it is likely that a more public stance on human rights may be taken by the Church then, if there has been no improvement in the situation. However, we doubt the willingness of the Church to move to a position of more open confrontation, following the Chilean example, until either the situation worsens or other pressures grow.

Classification

UNCLASSIFIED

OPTIONAL FORM 153A
(Formerly FS-413A)
January 1975
Dept. of State

UNCLASSIFIED

6. It should be noted that the Papal Nuncio and his deputy have made no secret of their more militant position and their somewhat unhappy view of the Argentine Church hierarchy. The Nuncio has told various ambassadors and visitors, including Human Rights Coordinator Patricia Derian, that he has spoken bluntly to President Videla about the need to improve the GOA record on human rights and warned that relations with the Papacy may soon deteriorate. ~~He himself could become symbol of such~~

~~strain, as he is due for consultations in Rome in late April or early May and has said privately that he might not come back.~~

7. For its part, GOA has tried to avoid confrontation with Church without at same time retreating on what it considers necessary policies in regard to suppression of subversion. There have been no more murders of priests by security forces, and harassment of priests and nuns in the schools or working with the poor is not now a significant problem (although this ~~may be partly due~~ in part may be due to lessened activity on part of Church in some of the more vulnerable fields). GOA is very unlikely to let its relations with the Church develop into serious and open confrontation without making at least some cosmetic concessions, but it does not appear yet that the Church is pushing hard enough to bring the GOA to even that point.

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UNCLASSIFIED

OPTIONAL FORM 153A
(Formerly FS-413A)
January 1975
Dept. of State